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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASMARA 000930

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SUBJECT: UNMEE MILITARY COMMANDER REPORTS LOWERED TENSION

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reasons 1.4 (b) AND (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: UNMEE Force Commander Major General Taisir, just back from a two-week visit to the field, reports Eritrean troops are reinforcing defensive positions. He said the near-starvation rations of the conscripted troops have stunted Eritrean military capability. General Taisir said President Isaias fears a U.S. assassination attempt, perhaps by missile strike on his quarters in Massawa, and is likely using the border dispute as a pretext to maintain dictatorial powers domestically. Taisir hopes UNMEE could continue, perhaps with a modified mandate, for five or six months beyond January. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Less Tension Along the Border

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UNMEE's military commander, Major General Taisir, met with the Ambassador December 10 on his return to Asmara from a fortnight in the field. Taisir said he found the border tension substantially reduced, although noted concerns about the area near Zela Ambessa in the Central Sector and in the Western Sector near Omhagar - Humera on the border with Sudan. Civilians along the border also seemed less fearful about an outbreak of hostilities than they were in October, he added. He said UNMEE played a small role in averting a confrontation near Zela Ambessa, where Eritrean troops are building new defensive works along the edge of a cliff "right on the border." The Eritrean troops were collecting stones for their new breastworks downhill from the lip of the rimrock, apparently inside Ethiopia. Ethiopian troops said they would shoot at the Eritreans if they continued collecting Ethiopian rocks; UNMEE relayed this to the Eritreans and they stopped.

¶3. (C) Isaias Fears a U.S. Assassination

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Taisir said the root of much of Isaias' anti-Americanism stems from his deep-seated fear that he is to be the target of a USG assassination attempt, "perhaps by a missile strike against the place he stays in Massawa." Taisir did not elaborate on the source of this information, although commented that he has frequent and good communication with the Eritrean general staff. (NOTE: Foreign Minister Osman Saleh, in the November 30 meeting with the Ambassador,

commented negatively on the USG policy of "regime change" in Eritrea. End Note.)

14. (C) Hungry Eritrean Troops  
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Tens of thousands of Eritrean conscripts exist on near-starvation rations, according to Taisir. "They get a tiny piece of bread and a little bit of something else for their food for the whole day," he reported. "This makes any talk of an Eritrean offensive very hard to imagine," he opined. He said Isaias wants to keep power and maintain his strict control over the population, adding, "he may not want a resolution to the border problem," as it provides the perfect pretext for continued domestic repression.

15. (C) UNMEE's Future  
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Taisir, acknowledging that it wasn't his call, said he thought it would be helpful for UNMEE to remain along the border at least "until late June" to see how the situation develops. Even should the mandate not be renewed beyond the end of January, he said UNMEE would remain until early to mid-April to ensure an orderly departure.

16. (C) Human Rights Day  
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The Ambassador's meeting with General Taisir occurred immediately following the ceremony marking Human Rights Day. The ceremony was attended by UN officials, the assembled diplomatic corps, school choirs, and UNMEE officers. The

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third-ranking Foreign Ministry official spoke on behalf of the GSE, a surprise for members of the diplomatic corps who said the GSE had boycotted Human Rights events in the recent past. The MFA's Ambassador Petros perfunctorily reaffirmed Eritrea's commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, then decried the plight of Eritreans driven from their homes by Ethiopia's "illegal occupation of sovereign Eritrean territory." The event, held at the UNMEE compound near the airport, was punctuated by three overflights by Eritrean Air Force fighters.

17. (C) BIO NOTE  
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UNMEE Force Commander Major General Mohammad Taisir said he was the third-ranking officer in the Jordanian Army. As UNMEE Force Commander, he said he spends two thirds of his time in Asmara, one third or less in Ethiopia. He has attended the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College, the Army War College, and other U.S. military training institutes. He is planning to visit Amman later in December, hinting that he may be in for a more senior Jordanian military position, although he noted he is scheduled to stay with UNMEE until April 8, 2008.

MCMULLEN